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ABSTRACT

This booklet, which draws heavily on the findings of a major study of the causes of student withdrawal from General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) courses in Britain, explains how student retention and completion can be improved at each stage of students' progress through a further education college. The booklet begins with background information on the study methodologies and conclusions, information about the publications arising from the project, and guidelines for using the booklet. In each of the next five sections, various issues identified during the survey are discussed in a format that includes some or all of the following: issues, checklists for addressing them, illustrative case studies, and pertinent quotations. The following topics are addressed: staff perceptions of GNVQ's, the accuracy of published rates of noncompletion, and staff versus student perceptions of reasons for noncompletion; planning for GNVQs (volume and timing of assignments); course guidance; program implementation (providing pastoral and learning support and balancing theory and practice); and course review and evaluation. The final chapter summarizes the study conclusions and lists seven types of further support for schools and colleges. Also included are an annotated listing of 24 useful resources and addresses and a list of 18 references. (MN)

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Department for Education and Employment

FEDA Further Education Development Agency

Peter Davies, Lorraine Mullaney and Pauline Sparkes

Improving GNVQ retention and completion

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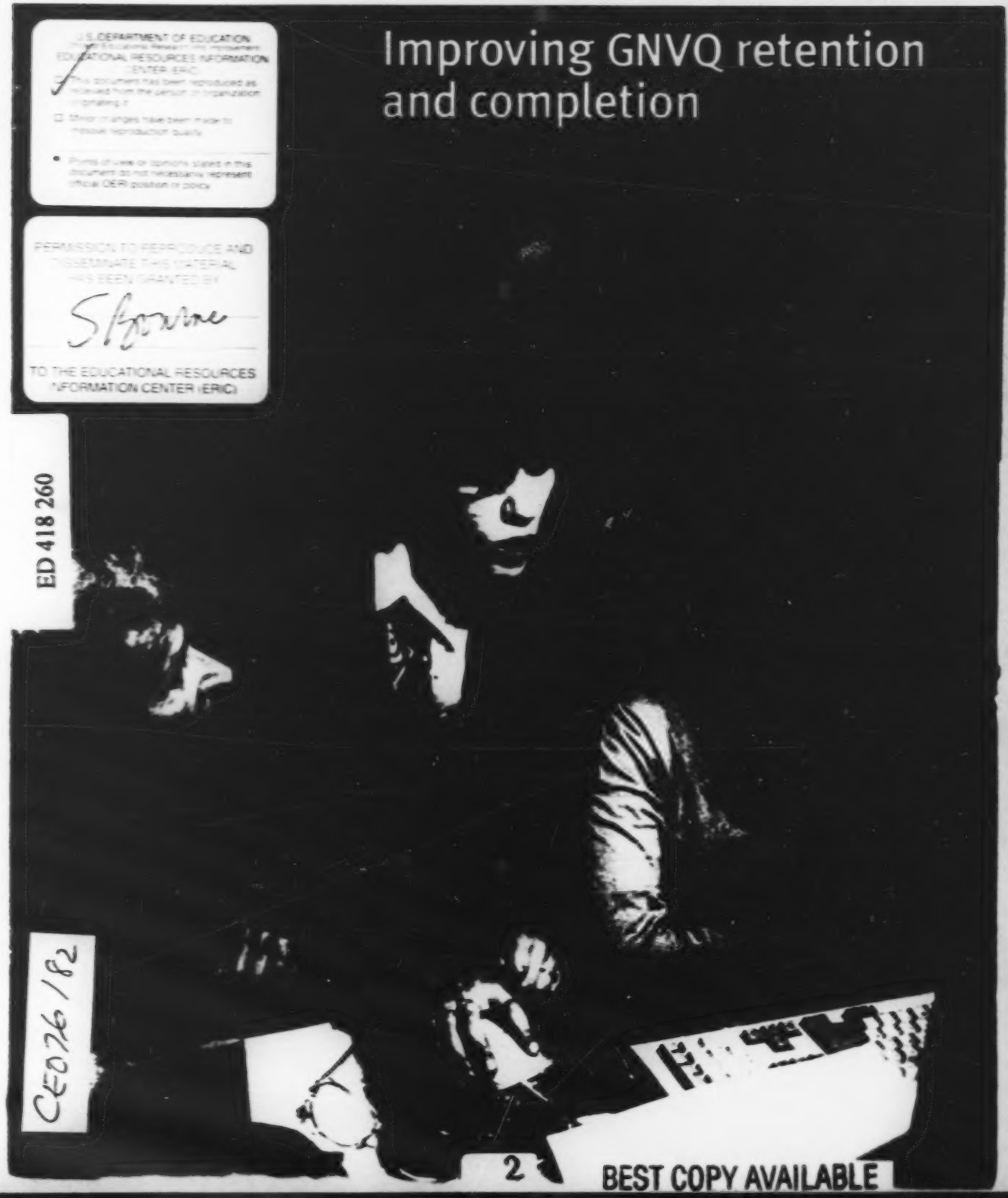

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Project Director **Andrew Morris**
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Karen Playle, Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)

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1 Preface

This publication is based on a major research project on the causes of student withdrawal from GNVQ courses. It was carried out by the Further Education Development Agency on behalf of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE).

The research gave rise to a large amount of information that could be of practical use to staff involved in delivering GNVQs. It was therefore decided to publish this booklet in a format that first presents the key findings of the research, then draws out their implications and finally offers advice for staff in schools and colleges.

The research team worked closely with representatives of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, OFSTED, Joint Council for Vocational Awarding Bodies, FEFC Inspectorate and the DfEE, in identifying the implications of the research findings.

A full report and summary brochure are also available from FEDA publications.

Andrew Morris
Head of Research and Consultancy, FEDA

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2 Introduction

Background to the project

On behalf of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), FEDA conducted research into the pattern of withdrawal, retention and achievement on General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) courses. The research aimed to identify the key influences on these patterns and the implications for those responsible for the design and delivery of the qualifications.

The methodologies employed in the research included:

- a large-scale questionnaire survey of students who enrolled on GNVQ courses in England and Wales
- a questionnaire survey of centres providing GNVQs
- follow-up interviews and focus groups with students who had returned questionnaires
- interviews with staff.

The outcomes of other research were also drawn upon, including general studies of student retention undertaken by FEDA.

The project did not concentrate solely on students who had not completed their courses successfully. Based on past experience, the project team believed that the patterns of achievement could only be understood fully by considering the comparative profile of students who succeeded.

The research project employs three broad shorthand categorisations of student status which we also use in this publication:

- **Non-completers** – students who left their GNVQ course before it ended.
- **Unsuccessful completers** – students who completed their GNVQ course, but had not gained the full award by the time of the survey (or who had completed the first year of a two-year GNVQ course, but were not continuing to the second year). It should be noted here that 'unsuccessful' only applies in the sense that those concerned had not completed all assessments at the time of the survey. Some within this category might have continued to gain the full award.
- **Successful completers** – students who completed their GNVQ course and gained the full award, or who completed the first year of a GNVQ course and were continuing to the second.

The conclusions of the research project are twofold:

- While some of the reasons for non-completion and unsuccessful achievement lie in the structure of the qualification, centres themselves can make a significant improvement to retention and achievement rates by the strategies they adopt to design and deliver GNVQ programmes.
- Changes in the design of the qualification – in particular to reduce the burden of the requirements for portfolio evidence – could improve achievement rates without lessening the intellectual rigour of the qualifications.

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Publications arising from the project

FEDA have produced a full project report containing tables of data and graphical analysis. It has been sent to the major bodies concerned with GNVQ design. A summary of this report which highlights the major research findings is also available in the form of a pamphlet. Copies of the full report and summary document are available from FEDA's publications department.

Many teachers, managers and staff working in schools and colleges participated in the research project. This booklet has been specifically designed to make practical use of the findings of the research and the suggestions provided by the project's participants.

How to use this publication

The full report and summary documents consider the implications of the research project for national agencies, schools and colleges. The purpose of this publication is to focus on the implications for schools and colleges running GNVQ courses.

This booklet examines how student retention and completion can be improved at each stage of the student's progress through college, drawing heavily on FEDA's research findings. It begins with an overview chapter which summarises the major issues raised by the research. It continues to deal with the issues raised at each stage of the student's progress through college. These issues are dealt with chronologically, beginning with issues arising at the planning stages of GNVQ courses, then moving on to deal with course guidance, on-programme support and course review and evaluation.

Each of these sections forms a chapter. The chapters deal with each issue separately under three headings. The first sub-section, entitled 'Research shows', takes evidence directly from FEDA's research project concerning the issue at hand. The second section, 'Implications', considers the implications of the research. The third provides a checklist of questions which staff will need to address when considering strategies to improve student retention and achievement. After this section there will follow either an example of good practice, a case study or a relevant quote.

The conclusion provides detailed information on further support offered by FEDA.

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3 Overview

Issue:

The negative coverage of GNVQs by the media is not reflected in the opinion of staff.

Research shows:

- The majority of staff and students were positive in their attitude to the qualification. Courses exceeded the expectations of almost half of the respondents to our survey, and clear majorities registered overall satisfaction and indicated that they would recommend someone else to study towards a GNVQ.
- At the time they were surveyed, almost three-quarters expected still to be engaged in full-time education from September 1997. Over a third of the non-completers and unsuccessful completers were engaged in further study or training, and under a quarter were unemployed.
- GNVQs therefore did appear to lead to progression, and to provide some added value even to those who did not gain the full award.

Implications:

The DfEE, QCA and other agencies need to communicate informed reactions to GNVQs more widely to employers, higher education, the careers service, school teachers, parents, prospective students and other interested parties. In particular, more evidence should be disseminated regarding the amount and quality of the work required of students, especially at the Advanced level. Careers Officers and employers should therefore be invited to awareness-raising events that focus primarily on the content and standards of GNVQ courses, rather than on issues related to progression.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- adopt a positive strategy for publicising the benefits of GNVQs that includes:
  - literature
  - events
  - taster days
- adopt a strategy for disseminating information to:
  - employers
  - parents
  - careers services
  - Higher Education institutions
- show employers and Higher Education institutions examples of student portfolios.

Issue:

Rates of successful completion and retention vary both between and within institutions.

Research shows:

- Rates of successful completion vary among institutions of the same type, often in ways which cannot be traced to the difference between student intake and catchment areas. These variations also occur between different GNVQ courses in the same institutions. This suggests that some centres and course teams are notably more effective than others in retaining students on GNVQ courses and in helping them to gain the full award at the end of the 'normal' duration for the level concerned.
- Practices within centres have a significant impact on achievement rates, whatever the local circumstances.

Implications:

The known examples of centres that achieve good completion rates in catchment areas with high levels of deprivation and with lower than average student prior attainment should be studied further, so that their effective practice can be disseminated and built upon.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- ☐ be aware of variations between the rates of retention and achievement across programmes within your institution
- ☐ find out how the rates of retention and achievement in your centre compare with other centres both locally and nationally
- ☐ consider these comparisons in your review and evaluation procedure
- ☐ set targets to improve retention and achievement
- ☐ identify the characteristics of successful programmes within your centre
- ☐ adopt a strategy for sharing good practice.

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Issue:

Rates of dropout and unsuccessful completion can appear to be exaggerated in some statistical reports.

Research shows:

- The public's ability to make informed judgements about the comparative performance of students on GNVQ courses, and those studying towards GCSEs or A-levels, is hindered by the fact that the pass rates are calculated from different bases. As a result, the relative achievement rates of GNVQ students can appear to be considerably worse than if the same base-line was employed.
- Non-completion rates on GNVQ programmes are further overestimated in the official statistics by the inclusion of a minority of students who have in fact transferred to another GNVQ programme, rather than having withdrawn totally.
- A further group of students attains the full GNVQ award in the Autumn term following the 'end' of their course, via the completion of outstanding portfolio evidence, or the retaking of tests.

Implications:

- At the end of compulsory education, every student could be issued with a unique identification number, to be recorded when they subsequently enrol for any further education or training. Pass rates for all national qualifications then need to be calculated and published, based on the numbers originally enrolled.
- Centre records need to distinguish drop-out, internal transfer, partial attainment, full attainment within the relevant academic year and attainment which takes place after the end of the relevant academic year.
- Employment opportunities have an influence on non-completion in a significant minority of cases.
- As GNVQs are vocational qualifications, obtaining employment is a positive outcome for many students.
- Transferring between courses may be a successful strategy for students needing to change level or programme.
- Centres should inform learners of the opportunities that exist for unit certification and completion of the award at a later date.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- ☐ adopt a system for tracking the reasons for student non-completion and details of destinations
- ☐ use a pastoral system which identifies the reasons why students leave the programme
- ☐ enable students to transfer between courses when appropriate
- ☐ track internal transfer.

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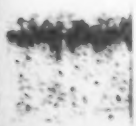

Issue:

There are differences between staff and student perceptions of the reasons for non-completion.

Research shows:

Staff perceived the main reasons for student withdrawal as:

- obtaining employment (especially at Intermediate level)
- insufficient interest or motivation (Foundation and Intermediate levels, rather than Advanced)
- failure to cope with the demands of the programme (especially at the Advanced level)
- disruption of the course caused by the centre.

Students' main reasons for withdrawal were:

- enrolling on the 'wrong' course
- finding the course 'boring'
- obtaining employment
- dissatisfaction with the quality of the teaching
- change in personal circumstances.

Implications:

- Virtually no centres list lack of interest in the course or enrolling on the 'wrong' course as reasons for withdrawal.
- Students' reasons for withdrawal tended to relate to the course, while staff tended to focus on the personal circumstances of students, rather than on the quality of the learning experience.
- The personal circumstances of students have some influence on non-completion rates, but have less of an impact than other factors, such as course provision.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- ☐ use regular student feedback to monitor satisfaction with programme delivery
- ☐ adopt a system for validating your perception as to why students drop out
- ☐ develop mechanisms for confirming students' reasons for leaving, such as an exit interview
- ☐ feed this information into course review and evaluation.

Case study:

Improving retention and completion

One college introduced the following system to identify the reasons for student 'drop-out':

- **each student's attendance is regularly monitored and all absences followed up by the student's personal tutor**
- **if a student is absent from college for more than a week they are contacted by independent student services to ascertain why and whether there is a possibility of the student leaving the programme**
- **student services invite any student who is identified as having dropped out to discuss why (independent staff are used in order to encourage students to be honest about their reasons for leaving)**
- **staff work with a checklist of possible reasons**
- **students' reasons for dropping out are fed back to course teams and used in review and evaluation.**

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4 Planning for GNVQs

Issue:

Students are often overloaded by the volume and timing of assignments.

Research shows:

- Students expressed dissatisfaction with the number, timing and difficulty of assignments. Even among those who did complete successfully, the timing of assignments and the amount of work were in general not rated very positively.
- Effective course teams, and the systems and processes they employ, have a more obvious impact on completion rates than the structure of the timetable, the number of taught hours or the size of classes.

Implications:

- Centres need to adopt a team approach to the design and delivery of GNVQ programmes to ensure that assignments are logically timed and students are not overburdened by having to complete too many assignments within a short space of time.
- The implications for the design of GNVQs by national bodies are covered in the final research report.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- ☐ adopt a team approach to course delivery
- ☐ ensure your centre's timetabling allows a team approach
- ☐ use a course plan which maps the setting and assessment of assignments and other activities
- ☐ make this plan available to students to assist them with time management
- ☐ track students' achievements against assignment deadlines on a regular basis.

Quote:

Course team

A team approach is essential to GNVQ courses, for assessment planning, well-designed student activities, delivering key skills, consistent standards and, most notably, for review and improvement of course quality. The team for each GNVQ course needs to have both the individual and the collective competence and expertise required to deliver all aspects of the course effectively. Roles need to be clearly defined, and the team should include members responsible for and involved in:

- teaching the various vocational units
- specialist contributions to key skills
- acting as personal tutors, and providing students' counselling and guidance
- assessment planning and feedback, and internal verification
- providing relevant support services – for example, library staff, learning resources staff, technical support staff etc – as appropriate.

GNVQ Quality Framework: Quality indicators and guidance for designing and running GNVQ courses

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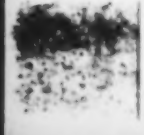

5 Course guidance

Issue:

The quality of guidance has a significant impact on eventual student success.

Research shows:

- Initial guidance often fails to prepare students for the requirements of the programme.
- Non-completers and unsuccessful completers recorded much higher incidences of experiences that did not match up to expectations.
- Non-completers and unsuccessful completers were also more likely to have expressed overall dissatisfaction with their course, and less likely to recommend others to enrol.
- Feeling that they had chosen the wrong course, that it lacked interest, and that the quality of teaching was unsatisfactory were all among the most commonly quoted reasons for withdrawal.

Implications:

- Organisations and individuals concerned with careers advice and guidance should be made more aware of the real demands of GNVQ programmes.
- Accurate information about the nature and demands of GNVQ programmes should be made clear to students and, where appropriate their parents, in recruitment literature, at open days and careers evenings, and at the interview stage.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- ☐ ensure that the course information you provide for students fully reflects the content and demands of the programme
- ☐ find out if your careers advisors and admissions tutors fully understand the demands of the programme
- ☐ ask your careers advisors and course tutors to liaise with admissions staff
- ☐ recommend that your careers advisors liaise with admissions staff and careers staff in other institutions.

Quote:

Students need to carry out initial planning and review activities related to:

- **recognition of previous achievement and experience and diagnosis of needs**
- **career aims, progression targets and overall priorities for the course**
- **short-term learning targets and planning for activities and assignments**
- **planning for assessment and assessment evidence.**

GNVQ Quality Framework: Quality indicators and guidance for designing and running GNVQ courses

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The following questionnaire could be given to students at interview, or used in recruitment literature, at open days and careers evenings to check that students fully understand the demands of the programme and have chosen a course which is appropriate for them.

Questionnaire on student perceptions and intentions

Vocational qualifications at this college

This college has offered vocational qualifications for many years. We have recently offered students the chance to study for GNVQ qualifications. We now offer Business and Science courses but are planning to increase the range of GNVQ courses on offer.

To help with our decision about which areas we will offer we have put together a brief questionnaire about GNVQ courses. We would be very grateful if you could spend some time answering these questions to help us provide the courses which are best suited to our future students.

Do you know what the initials GNVQ stand for? ☐ yes ☐ no

GNVQ qualifications are available at three levels.
Please estimate what a GNVQ Intermediate course is equivalent to (tick one choice):

☐ lower than GCSE
☐ 2 GCSEs
☐ 3 GCSEs
☐ 4 GCSEs

After a GNVQ Advanced course, which of the following options could a student choose (tick any which you think are correct):

☐ a GCSE course
☐ an A-level course in a related area
☐ an HND course at university
☐ a degree course at university
☐ enter employment

If a course offered you the chance of work experience on employers' premises, which of the following would you prefer (tick one choice):

☐ a single block during your course
☐ a regular spread of short sessions of work experience throughout the course
☐ the chance to visit employers' premises as required to cover your needs.

If you decided to follow a GNVQ course, which of the following activities would you like to see as part of the course (tick all those you might wish to see):

☐ the role of sport in politics and society
☐ explaining marketing principles
☐ contributing to team activities
☐ planning production schedules for a product
☐ planning production schedules for a performance of some kind
☐ the organisation of businesses
☐ preparing to take part in a performance activity
☐ learning how you are able to relate to others in a group
☐ the different roles of employers and customers in a business structure
☐ learning about observation and recording to aid reporting
☐ understanding the relationships between workers in a business

Given a completely free choice, which of the following activities do you think you might follow when you leave school/college (tick as many as you wish):

- ☐ work in a science-based company as a technician
- ☐ work in a science-based company as a manager of people
- ☐ work in the entertainment industry as a performer
- ☐ work in the entertainment industry as a technician
- ☐ work in a business which produces a product for others
- ☐ be involved with the management of people
- ☐ work with computers as an operator
- ☐ work with computers as a programmer
- ☐ work with animals used for recreation
- ☐ work involving the motivation of others
- ☐ work at sites of special interest
- ☐ analyse water quality
- ☐ assess programmes for visitors at leisure times
- ☐ plan visitor programmes
- ☐ plan to provide animals with a nutritional diet

Given a completely free choice, do you think you would be likely to choose a GNVQ course at college in preference to A-levels? ☐ yes ☐ no

If your previous answer was no, please give a brief reason why you would not.
An honest answer would be appreciated.

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Issue:

There is sometimes a conflict between the need to recruit students in order to secure funding and the provision of objective guidance.

Research shows:

- The financial pressures on centres to recruit students may sometimes conflict with the requirement to guide students towards the courses most appropriate to their interests, aspirations and abilities.
- In these circumstances, it was not surprising that alternative programme areas were frequently offered to students when their first choice was not available at the centre concerned, rather than pro-active direction towards the nearest alternative centre able to meet the students' first choice.

Implications:

Current funding arrangements do not necessarily support the provision of objective guidance. Students are sometimes guided onto a programme which is not totally suitable to their needs rather than being counselled and guided in a more appropriate direction.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- ☐ provide objective advice and guidance based on individual student need
- ☐ find out the extent to which your student recruitment is influenced by financial pressures.

Quote:

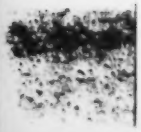
Student entry and selection

Entry criteria for GNVQs should be geared primarily to the likelihood of success on the particular course. Criteria may vary between centres depending on the time and resources given to the course, and staff expertise in providing support for particular kinds of student need – some centres may achieve success with students whom other centres would not consider it appropriate to accept. There is a particular danger as regards Intermediate GNVQs – some centres may be tempted to accept, onto a one-year course, students whose previous achievement indicates that they have only a small chance of success. Such students may be suited to a Foundation course or to an Intermediate course spread over a longer period.

Criteria and decisions on entry and selection should be realistic, and relate both to student needs and abilities, and to planned approaches and resources for course delivery. For example:

- criteria should be neither too open nor too restrictive
- equivalence of qualifications should be recognised – neither under-qualified nor over-qualified students should be accepted simply to boost numbers
- a range of evidence of achievement should be considered
- a student's potential, aspirations and progression interests should be fully considered.

GNVQ Quality Framework: Quality indicators and guidance for designing and running GNVQ courses



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Issue:

There is a correlation between high levels of success at GNVQ level and prior educational achievement and future aspirations.

Research shows:

- Higher rates of non/unsuccessful completion were associated in this study, as in others undertaken previously, with prior attainment in GCSEs. There was also a relationship with lower levels of educational aspiration, and with less clarity about future intentions. In these circumstances, it would be no surprise to find that other qualifications, such as A-levels, undertaken by students in comparatively higher attainment bands had better pass rates than their GNVQ equivalents.
- Students who feel that they have enrolled on the right course, who find it stimulating and practically relevant to their career aspirations, and who are otherwise satisfied with the quality of its delivery are far more likely to complete successfully than those with contrary views. They are also more likely to cope with personal problems and the competing attractions of full-time employment while persevering with their course.

Implications:

- Centres should have selection criteria which reflect the fact that GNVQs are demanding programmes of study. They should not regard GNVQs as a soft option. Centres need to check that the GNVQ is an appropriate progression route for the future aspirations of students.
- Further research is necessary in order to investigate and define more closely the relationship between initial attainment (for example at GCSE) and GNVQ performance. If strong relationships can be identified, these need to underpin initial guidance and inform the monitoring and review of student progress.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- ☐ implement a selection and recruitment policy
- ☐ ensure that your selection criteria accurately reflect the demands of the qualification
- ☐ discuss future aspirations with potential students
- ☐ evaluate how you measure the value added, i.e. the relative achievement rates of students.

Case study:

South East Essex College

This college had a large cohort of adult full-time students (875 in 1994–95). The retention rate in the same year was 75% and most of the early withdrawal occurred in the first term. Research revealed that a significant number of students were joining inappropriate courses. Entry criteria were introduced as part of a comprehensive and extensive strategy. In the following year, recruitment dipped quite sharply (to 658) but completion rates rose by 10%. Some of the potential recruits were diverted to other courses or modes of attendance, although this was not monitored by the project. Overall, the college felt that the improvement in retention and student satisfaction more than outweighed the immediate costs of lower recruitment, and has created a secure foundation for future development.

Improving student retention: a guide to successful strategies by Paul Martinez

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6 On programme

Issue:

A key factor in successful achievement on GNVQ courses is the quality of the induction process.

Research shows:

There is a correlation between rates of non- and unsuccessful completion and satisfaction with the induction programme.

Implications:

Centres are advised to ensure that the induction programme adequately introduces students to the demands, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment requirements of the programme.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- ☐ implement an induction programme
- ☐ make sure your induction programme introduces students to the following:
  - the structure and requirements of GNVQs
  - 'GNVQ speak'
  - grading
  - key skills (including initial assessment)
  - resources available in the centre
  - team building
  - level of demand during the programme
  - teaching and learning strategies
  - assessment requirements and methodology
- ☐ ensure your induction programme includes provision for team building.

Quote:

Purpose of induction

The purpose of induction is to introduce students to the main kinds of activity the will undertake on the course; providing a thorough understanding of unit specifications is an essential part of this. Many activities included in induction will continu throughout the course proper, and it may thus be hard to determine where inductio ends and the full course begins. Alternatively, some induction activities may continue alongside formal delivery and assessment of vocational units. A good GNVC induction brings together all main aspects of the course; it is therefore desirable that all staff who make a major contribution to the GNVQ should be involved.

GNVQ Quality Framework: Quality indicators and guidance fc designing and running GNVQ course

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The following record demonstrates how you can check that students have had a thorough induction process.

Induction record

Name	**Group**	**Date**
My head of faculty is:	**My training advisor is:**	
My head of school is:	**My workshop technician is:**	
My course tutor is:		

The following have been explained to me:

- ☐ GNVQ assessment, grading systems and key skills
- ☐ GNVQ 'speak'
- ☐ Teaching and learning strategies
- ☐ Candidates' record book
- ☐ GNVQ registration
- ☐ Appeals procedure
- ☐ Grants/travel allowance
- ☐ Building my portfolio
- ☐ The student handbook

I have been shown the location of:

- ☐ Canteen facilities
- ☐ Fire exits, assembly points
- ☐ Toilets
- ☐ First aid room
- ☐ Location of workshops/classrooms
- ☐ College library/resource centre
- ☐ Students' union

I have been made aware of and understand the procedures relating to:

- ☐ No smoking policy
- ☐ Fire precautions
- ☐ Workshop safety
- ☐ Use of equipment
- ☐ Car parking
- ☐ The college safety policy
- ☐ Tea/lunch breaks
- ☐ Absence from college/sickness
- ☐ Weeks and hours of attendance
- ☐ Student responsibilities/conduct
- ☐ Discipline
- ☐ Course requirements/equipment

Medical

Do you have a disability? ☐ yes ☐ no

If yes, please specify:

Do you take medication? ☐ yes ☐ no

If yes, please specify:

The first aider is:

I am aware that the following additional support is available should I need it:

- ☐ Curriculum support
- ☐ Confidential counselling
- ☐ Welfare and careers advice

Signed:

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Issue:

The quality of both pastoral and learning support provided to students is a key factor in successful achievement on GNVQ courses.

Research shows:

- High levels of satisfaction in these areas were strongly related to successful completion.
- Students' personal circumstances have some influence on non-completion rates. Students are most likely to withdraw where personal factors operate in conjunction with programme-related factors. Study difficulties, in particular, may be reinforced by the conflicting demands of part-time work.
- The absence of a positive overall reaction to a course is one of the best signs of a student at risk of non-completion. Unpunctuality and absenteeism are often connected with dissatisfaction and demotivation.

Implications:

- Centres offering GNVQs should provide appropriate learning support based on initial screening and diagnostic assessment of student learning requirements.
- Centres need to consider whether additional programme-specific diagnostic assessment is necessary.
- Where there is lack of student motivation or maturity, centres need to put in place appropriate developmental and support measures such as tutoring, confidence building, opportunities for collaborative learning, student support networks and differentiated and carefully sequenced learning tasks.
- Formative evaluation needs to start early in the course and then follow at regular intervals. From the start, course teams need to establish if students have doubts about any aspects of their course. This allows teachers to address concerns or difficulties, identify any students 'at risk' (then inform student support or remedial actions) and motivate and encourage students by giving them an increased sense of involvement in the learning process.
- Centres should communicate clear expectations of punctuality and attendance. Lateness and absenteeism should be followed up immediately in a firm but supportive manner, involving parents where appropriate.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- adopt a system for the initial assessment of students' needs
- implement systems for student support
- adopt a system which ensures that students' needs have been responded to
- implement a tutorial system which is linked to individual programmes
- implement systems for tracking and monitoring student progress and identifying students at risk
- liaise with parents and carers concerning student progress
- ensure that students have a personal tutor
- find out if your centre has sufficient resources to support individual learning needs (such as tutorial support, Learning Resource Centres or support for students with learning difficulties or disabilities)
- identify any gaps in provision and suggest strategies to fill them.

Case study:

The following case study shows you how a support system may be set up.

Dyslexia support programme at Lambeth College

Lambeth College is a large multi-site college in South London catering for disadvantaged socioeconomic groups. It has some 8,000 students, of whom over half are full-time.

A demand for a dyslexia support service was identified. This was done by offering an embryonic support service.

Strategy (1992)

Immediate identified needs were to:

- establish a cross-college dyslexia support service (there were eight sites at the time)
- identify demand for the service and monitor numbers of students requiring support
- publicise embryonic service and referral system to staff (staff booklet).

Development of service (post 1993)

- Staff awareness sessions in some departments/schools
- Staff awareness booklet of good practice in the classroom (to all college staff)
- Training staff to meet demand; requirement for dyslexia support trainees to give awareness sessions on sites where they work; inclusion of a member of the Dyslexia Support Service on each Course/School Team
- Formalise systems for cross-college provision, including support, exam entitlement, rooming, equipment, budget, team building
- Student support groups (empowerment for students to negotiate appropriate strategies within class)
- Advocacy on behalf of students where required
- Development funding from CENTEC for Dyslexia Community Project, thereby creating a direct link with dyslexic people not in education or training.

Outcomes

- Where dyslexia support has been established over a period of time, staff have become familiar with the difficulties which dyslexic students may have and are more likely to refer students for dyslexia or other support.
- Staff are less likely to make untested assumptions about student learning and are more likely to identify and respond to the actual learning needs of students.
- Teachers are more likely to adopt classroom strategies which are appropriate for dyslexic need, and experiment with teaching methods which may be of benefit to all students.
- Certain worksheets, exercises and types of teaching have been abandoned or curtailed.
- A bank of materials is being compiled appropriate to students with different learning styles.
- Teaching methodology has become more explicit, more concrete and more aware of student need.
- Staff have been empowered to deal with issues around language processing difficulties in the classroom.

Improving student retention: a guide to successful strategies by Paul Martinez

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Issue:

There needs to be a balance between practical and theoretical work and an emphasis on making programmes vocationally relevant.

Research shows:

- Lower rates of successful completion are associated with excessive amounts of written work, and insufficient amounts of practical work.
- Well-organised work experience placements have a positive impact on achievement rates.
- The experience of one or more work placements during a GNVQ programme appeared to be linked with somewhat higher rates of successful completion, though lengthier total periods of placement did not seem to have any further positive impact. Providing centres were also generally positive about the value of work experience. While some noted that placements led to the loss of students who were offered jobs as a result, overall this does not seem to have been the main reason for withdrawal in more than a small minority of cases.
- Student satisfaction in the following areas was related to successful completion:
  - the perceived relevance of the course to the world of work
  - the perceived help in progressing to higher level qualifications, including those at university (especially among respondents at the Advanced level).

Implications:

Most students prefer practical, vocationally-relevant programmes. Demotivation is common when programmes are not vocationally relevant and when work experience placements are inappropriate.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- ☐ use authentic industry-related materials in your teaching
- ☐ ensure that there is a balance between practical and written work in your programmes
- ☐ ensure that there is a real vocational focus
- ☐ ensure that the vocational experience of staff is regularly updated, for example, sending teachers into industry and providing them with work-related problems to solve
- ☐ provide quality work experience placements
- ☐ involve industry in the design and delivery of your programme.

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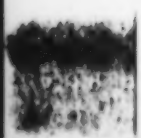

Issue:

Incomplete portfolio development is a significant feature in non-completion.

Research shows:

- Students and staff frequently complain of assignment overload. Failure to complete portfolio evidence characterises many students who fail to gain the full award.
- It can also trigger drop-out among those who perceive that they have fallen too far behind to catch up.
- Staff frequently complain that the quantity of evidence which has to be produced by GNVQ students is unrealistic.
- Some centres are more successful than others in alleviating the problems of student workload.
- Successful strategies involve:
  - good quality induction programmes
  - careful scheduling by course teams
  - the choice of fewer, better designed assignments, and other methods that ensure compliance with evidence requirements.
- They are also characterised by the implementation of deadlines for handing in and assessing assignments, combined with arrangements to support students in fulfilling the workload, including the provision of regular blocks of time to catch up.

Implications:

- Centres need to have systems for helping students to compile portfolio evidence, and for recording and reviewing the evidence in the portfolio.
- Even though students with low prior attainment, motivation or maturity are more likely to drop out or complete unsuccessfully, their failure to gain a full GNVQ award is by no means inevitable if they are identified at an early stage and effectively supported thereafter. Such students require particular help in developing their portfolios. Where this support is forthcoming, students readily recognise its value in keeping them on-track for successful completion.
- Centres could adopt strategies, such as those given above, based on examples of good practice.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- ☐ provide guidance and support for students compiling portfolios
- ☐ adapt this guidance to the level of programme
- ☐ track and monitor the progress of students' portfolios
- ☐ establish review procedures
- ☐ check portfolios regularly
- ☐ identify students at risk
- ☐ run regular checks to identify students at risk
- ☐ timetable a 'catch-up' period within your programme plan
- ☐ be aware that there are key periods when students tend to be 'at risk'.

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GNVQ Communication Level 3 tracking sheet

Discussion evidence		Performance criteria						
Portfolio reference for evidence	**What do I have to find? Evidence of discussion:**	**Date**	**I can contribute things that are relevant to the situation.**	**I use a suitable tone and manner.**	**I check to make sure I understand points made by others.**	**I say things that move the discussion on.**	**I create opportunities for others to contribute.**	
	One to one, audience known, subject familiar to audience		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	One to one, audience known, subject unfamiliar to audience		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	One to one, audience unknown, subject unfamiliar to audience		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	Group, audience known, subject familiar to audience		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	Group, audience known, subject unfamiliar to audience		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	Group, audience unknown, subject unfamiliar to audience		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	

Written materials evidence		Performance criteria						
Portfolio reference for evidence	**What do I have to find? Evidence of my writing:**	**Date**	**My information is accurate and to the point.**	**My writing is readable, the meaning is clear and I correct where necessary.**	**I spell accurately. I use punctuation appropriately.**	**I use a suitable layout.**	**I use structure and style to make my meaning clear.**	
	Freely structured, audience unknown and unfamiliar with complex subjects		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	Freely structured, audience known and unfamiliar with complex subject		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	Freely structured, audience unknown and familiar with complex subject		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	Freely structured, any audience, familiar or unfamiliar with complex subject		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	Outline – report, letter, etc		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	
	Form		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	

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The following sheet shows one way of tracking students' key skills within portfolio evidence.

Quote:

Students' portfolios

It is important that students have both initial and continuing guidance and support in respect of the skills they need to build and present quality portfolios. Such skills include:

- judging what is and what is not relevant to unit specifications, and selecting the most appropriate evidence, where there is a choice of what to include
- presenting evidence in an appropriate form, and ensuring that it is easily accessible to assessors, and internal and external verifiers
- indexing and cross-referencing in a way that is economic and shows clearly which evidence relates to each vocational and key skills unit and element, and to grading criteria
- evaluating the quality of their evidence and their portfolio presentation, and seeking continually to improve this.

GNVQ Quality Framework: Quality indicators and guidance for designing and running GNVQ courses

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7 Course review and evaluation

Issue:

Course review and evaluation needs to be an integral part of the continuous improvement of GNVQ programmes.

Research shows:

Action within providing centres does have a significant positive impact upon rates of successful completion.

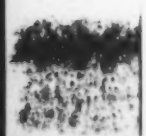
Implications:

Centres need to review their delivery of GNVQs, with a view to identifying potential scope for improvements.

Checklist:

Here are some helpful ideas that emerged from our survey of teachers:

- ☐ improve teamwork in programme planning and delivery by ensuring that assignments and opportunities for generating evidence are appropriately spaced, and 'catch-up' time is scheduled, if necessary
- ☐ reduce the volume of assignments by having fewer assessment tasks and designing them better
- ☐ pay particular attention to the development of the learning skills and competence which students require to succeed in their coursework
- ☐ in team planning, take more account of the effect of any concurrent studies towards other qualifications
- ☐ be rigorous in the implementation of deadlines, coupled with learning support mechanisms, to reduce the incidence of accumulated backlogs of student work
- ☐ implement rigorous systems for tracking and reviewing student achievement
- ☐ ensure that managers make it possible for GNVQ course teams to meet regularly for programme planning purposes
- ☐ review the content of your GNVQ induction programmes to ensure that they provide students with an effective understanding of the assessment demands of the course. Students should be guided carefully in their choice of any concurrent studies, and their progress in such studies should be reviewed in the context of their total workload
- ☐ in your periodic reviews of the curriculum, include the investigation of significant variance in achievement levels across programme areas and/or levels, in order to identify good practice and inform improvement strategies.



8 Conclusion

Conclusions from the research

The final report

The final report of the research project indicated that the overall reaction to GNVQs was positive, from both staff and students.

Students' reactions to their programmes of study were generally favourable, and a source of positive motivation. Most students would recommend their GNVQ course to someone else. At the time of the research, the majority of students were planning to remain in full-time education. Even over a third of the non-completers and unsuccessful completers were engaged in further study or training and under a quarter were unemployed. GNVQs therefore did appear to lead to progression, and to convey some added value even to those who did not gain the full award.

Of the staff interviewed, the overwhelming impression was of genuine commitment to the success of the qualification, and a favourable disposition towards its essential characteristics. Most staff would be able to promote GNVQ courses with enthusiasm if their concerns about the assessment requirements were addressed.

Further support for schools and colleges

The DfEE is providing support services for schools and colleges which is delivered through FEDA. The following services are offered:

Subject workshops

Each term FEDA organises a series of GNVQ workshops which provide the opportunity for teachers to get to grips with areas like assignment writing, key skills integration, grading to national standards and teaching and learning strategies. There is usually a choice of topics to concentrate on, so that the needs of as many as possible are met.

Vocational relevance

FEDA is working with the National Council of Industry Training Organisations (NCITO) and other organisations to promote progression routes into employment and improve the vocational nature of GNVQ programmes.

Exemplar materials and models

The GNVQ Information and Advice unit has an extensive collection of example assignments, assessment documentation, tracking and recording documentation, staff handbooks and internal verification handbooks. These are available from the GNVQ helpline, Tel: 0171 962 1066.

Publications

Latest News is published and distributed to all GNVQ centres each term. A Directory of development projects and their outcomes funded by the GNVQ Support Programme is published annually.

You will find frequent feature articles about developments in the GNVQ field in *Inform*, FEDA's newsletter. *Inform* also lists relevant events, research projects and publications.

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Consultancy and customised training

You can obtain customised training and advice on a wide range of GNVQ topics, including key skills, quality assurance, work-relatedness, teaching and learning strategies and GNVQs in the Key Stage 4 curriculum.

Staff development packs for the revised GNVQ

FEDA is co-ordinating the production of nine staff development packs, designed to support the introduction of the revised GNVQ. These will be published during 1998 and 1999. They cover most aspects of GNVQ, from the implications for managers to teaching and assessing key skills in the revised GNVQ.

Internet

FEDA's website includes an extensive section on the GNVQ Support Programme's activities. Regular items include the Calendar of Events, the resource materials database and the two most recent issues of *Latest News*. In addition you can find updates and information about other current GNVQ developments and topics.

A new development is the provision of materials and models to be downloaded. We intend to develop this service, making our Web pages into a key dissemination route. There are also links to other web sites relevant to GNVQs. The pages are constantly updated and include contact and e-mail information. FEDA's website: **http:\\www.feda.ac.uk**

For any further queries about anything to related to GNVQs, contact the FEDA GNVQ helpline, Tel: 0171 962 1066 or E-mail: **gnvq@feda.ac.uk**

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9 Useful resources

We hope that the following resources may be of use to you. However, FEDA cannot accept responsibility for the quality.

Assessing students' work

Series **£5.00 each** **QCA** These cover both Intermediate and Advanced level. They give supporting commentary on how to meet unit and grading requirements. and are available in the following subject areas:

- Business
- Health and Social Care
- Manufacturing
- Leisure and Tourism
- Science.

Core skills in GNVQs: principles and practice: a guide from schools and colleges

£2.50 ☐ **July 1996** ☐ **QCA** This has been designed for use by individuals or as staff development activities, and shows how Key Skills can be contextualised within vocational activities.

Getting to grips with GNVQs: handbook for teachers

Book ☐ **£16.95** ☐ **1994** ☐ **Kogan Page** Topics covered include:

- the role of the course tutor
- planning the GNVQ curriculum
- the importance of key skills assessment
- course evaluation
- marketing.

GNVQ assessment: your questions answered

16 page booklet ☐ **free** ☐ **QCA** This gives answers to teachers and verifiers' most common questions on assessment and recording.

GNVQ briefing

Free ☐ **June 1995** ☐ **QCA** Provides information on the form, development and implementation of GNVQs

GNVQ centre approval: common criteria for the initial approval of GNVQ centres and courses

£2.00 ☐ **QCA** This is drawn from the Quality Framework and specifies what centres must do for initial approval to offer GNVQs.

GNVQ into practice: how was it for you?

Book ☐ **Glover, L** ☐ **£14.99** ☐ **1995** ☐ **Cassell Plc** Provides guidance on how to plan, how to structure, how to guide and help students through the new style of work and assessment. Includes examples of implementation in a selection of vocational programmes in both schools and colleges.

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GNVQ: qualified to work

Case studies of progression to employment ☐ pack ☐ £2.50 ☐ June 1997 ☐ QCA A pack containing 25 case studies of students who have completed a GNVQ course and then gained employment.

GNVQ quality framework: quality indicators and guidance for designing and running GNVQ courses

Book ☐ £5.00 ☐ March 1995 ☐ QCA The Framework draws on good practice in GNVQ schools and colleges.

Guide to grading Advanced GNVQs

Series ☐ £2.00 each ☐ QCA These guides give a detailed explanation of what the grading criteria mean in relation to the assignments. They use examples of grading GNVQ assignments and are available in the following subject areas:

- Grading Advanced Business GNVQ: a student's guide
- Grading Advanced Health and Social Care GNVQ: a guide for students and teachers
- Grading Advanced Leisure and Tourism GNVQ: a guide for students and teachers
- Grading Advanced Manufacturing GNVQ: a guide for students and teachers
- Grading Leisure and Tourism GNVQ: a guide for students and teachers
- Grading Engineering GNVQ: a guide for students and teachers.

Implementing GNVQs: a manual

£15.00 ☐ 1995 ☐ Further Education Development Agency Resource for staff involved in GNVQ curriculum development and delivery in colleges. It addresses GNVQ curriculum planning at institutional level, curriculum development and programme management by programme teams.

Individual commitment to learning: individuals' decision-making about 'lifetime learning'

Booklet ☐ Hand, A *et al* ☐ free ☐ 1994 ☐ DfEE

Introducing GNVQs

Leaflet ☐ free ☐ 1995 ☐ QCA A general leaflet on GNVQs: what they are, who they are for and where they lead

Parents' and guardians' guide to choices at 16

Book ☐ £2.50 ☐ Gold, K ☐ 1995 ☐ Hobsons Questions and answers to help 15–16 year olds choose the right options. Endorsed by NACGT and ICG.

Planning, co-ordinating and managing GNVQ curriculum

Booklet ☐ £5.00 ☐ 1994 ☐ Further Education Unit ☐ available from Further Education Development Agency This publication offers advice and guidance on co-ordinating and organising a college response to the introduction of GNVQs.

Promoting student-centred learning in vocational curriculum

Book ☐ Gregory, M and Impey, R ☐ £16.95 ☐ 1996 ☐ Kogan Page Authors provide practical advice and guidance on how to support the individual learner through all aspects of a course. Includes: developing resource-based learning, counselling the learner, using student portfolios, tracking and monitoring students through learner programmes.

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The school management handbook

Book ☐ **Green, H** ☐ **£16.95** ☐ **April 1995** ☐ **Kogan Page** Fourth Edition. Not GNVQ specific, a general management book gives some practical advice on a range of issues including: the National Curriculum post-Dearing, quality assurance in schools, reporting to parents and the new vocational curriculum.

Addresses

Cassell Plc, Wellington House, 125 Strand, London WC2R 0BB Tel: 0171 420 5555

Department for Education and Employment (for publications only), Cambertown Ltd, Unit 21, Commercial Road, Goldthorpe, Rotherham, South Yorkshire S63 9BL
Tel: 01709 888688

Further Education Development Agency, Coombe Lodge, Blagdon, Bristol BS40 7RG
Tel: 01761 462503 Fax: 01761 463140

Further Education Development Agency, Citadel Place, Tinworth Street, London SE11 5EH
Tel: 0171 962 1280 Fax: 0171 962 1266

Hobsons, Biblios, Publishers Distribution Services Ltd, Star Road, Partridge Green, West Sussex RH13 8JD Tel: 01403 710851

Kogan Page, 120 Pentonville Road, London N1 9JN Tel: 0171 278 0433

QCA, Customer Services, Newcombe House, 45 Notting Hill, London W11 3JB
Tel: 0181 867 3333

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Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (1996) **Part One GNVQ pilot interim report 1995–96.** HMSO

Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (1997) **Standards of achievement in GNVQs in sixth forms 1996.** HMSO

Scottish Education Department HM Inspectorate (1990) **Measuring up: performance indicators in further education.**

Wolf, A (1994, 1995 and 1997) **GNVQs 1993–94 & 1994–95 national survey reports: first and second interim reports, and final report.** FEU and FEDA

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strategic research

On behalf of the DfEE, FEDA recently researched the key influences on the patterns of withdrawal, retention and achievement on GNVQ courses. *Improving GNVQ retention and completion* highlights the issues arising from this recent project and offers teachers and managers practical suggestions for improving student retention and completion in schools and colleges.